

## Write Your Own Bible

An old monk named Theophane told me a story once of a novice monk who's running late for a chapel service and he's fretting about not having his Bible with him. The elder monk tells him to "go on and get to chapel" and the novice monk exclaims, "But I don't have my Bible!" To which the elder monk responds in consternation, "Bible? Well, write your own Bible! You have divine stories of God's providence in your life. You have heroic journeys of daring when God has been with you. You have tales of failure and woe as well as wise teachings and experiences of the divine in your everyday life. Write your own Bible!" We might be surprised at the elder monk's advice but if we stop to think about it, I hope we can get that he's right. This motivation is at the heart of the Gospel we call Mark. Mark literally wrote HIS Bible. He had a take on how the resurrected Lord was active and alive in his day and age so he retold the story of how Jesus brought the good news of the kingdom of God. We all have stories about how we come to experience the good news of the kingdom of God in our lives, if only we allow ourselves to be present to it. For me, it's the same. This past Thursday the 18th of January marked 4 years since being ordained an Episcopal priest right here in this Sanctuary. That was the capstone of a process that started all the way back in 2008 when I was attending Trinity Cathedral downtown and I approached the Dean with my intention to enter the priest discernment process. And if you're doing the math in you head, that's right it took 6 years to get through that process and I didn't have to go back and do seminary again—but still, it was a lot like jumping through hoops that kept moving. All the way through it I never doubted MY experience of Jesus and the good news of the kingdom of God. My ordination wasn't just a 6-year discernment process;

it was the result of a lifetime of discernment. Growing up Baptist, I got baptized, the first time, when I was 10 years old. My teenage years were marked by my being a nominal Christian with one nagging thought: “Wow, when is this ‘being a Christian-thing’ going to matter?” I was annoyed that I didn’t “feel” anything. In the evangelical tradition you’re expected to talk about how you’ve been “saved.” I mean, sure, I went to church every Sunday and was even the whiz kid in Sunday School; but I was still wondering what it was that I was being saved from, I mean really, everybody recognized me as a “good kid.” I never had any great revelations from God. I didn’t have any stories of how I had turned from my wicked ways to the light of the salvation of God. My testimony lacked pizzaz I thought. Sure, I was a Christian, but big deal. Spiritual growth finally happened for me when I went to college and joined up with that organization that is on many college campuses today called Campus Crusade for Christ. And it was out of my experience there that I decided to seal the “self-revival deal” by getting baptized again. That’s what you do when you have a recommitment in the Baptist church—you say your first baptism was phony, but NOW it counts. My curiosity about learning more and more about God really got to me. I found myself looking at divinity grad schools as my future beyond my Bachelor’s degree which I finally got in Political Science. I ended up going for my Master of Divinity at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City but at the end I STILL wanted more; so I went on to get my Ph.D. in New Testament from THE Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. And I LOVED seminary. With every class I took I found myself behaving like the hungry dog on a meaty bone—I grabbed it and just went to town on it. My final graduation led to me pastoring a Southern Baptist church in Illinois just north of St. Louis. I took this position with gusto because, well, I was

anxious to start making some money and pay off my student loans. And then, things didn't go so well. Parish life in the Midwest didn't really go as I had planned and after 2 years there I started to see that my future as a Baptist minister on a short tether. I had gotten jaded and frustrated at life not looking like I thought it should. Married life wasn't what I thought it should be—my attitude was, “Really I've been a good kid, behaving all these years, and this is the pay-off?” You see, I had these expectations that God was going to reward me for my years of being good—so I certainly didn't see this coming! You see, I was under the delusion that my being good had earned me something from God, that I was always good enough FOR God to bless because, well, I WAS good enough, so I thought. I thought God would be happy to call me one of His own so everything in my life should just come up roses and daffodils. But it didn't. So just a couple of months into my third year as a Baptist minister I found myself fed up and I resigned and headed to Colorado. My first Sunday there I went to an old Episcopal Church in Castle Rock. There I experienced kneeling in church for the first time. I experienced prayer that was meaningful and I felt the presence of God like never before. This church had a Rector who could best be described as an earthy mystic and this community of faith nurtured me as I began to rebuild my life, update my spirituality, and reprogram my mind for my life's mission. It was while I was working with the youth group at that church that I met Theophane the monk at St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. His story of “Write your own Bible” impacted me deeply and led me to start to appreciate all the exigencies of my life, MY failures and woes—my unjust expectations of God. I had to get honest with myself about how I had short-changed God. I had placed unreal expectations on what I should get. What became clear

to me is that my life was nothing if not a narrative of God's good news of the kingdom coming present in the world. But what had I been saved from? What was it that I had to repent of? What was my "big sin"? In a word: smugness. You don't hear that word much today, but that doesn't make it any the less real for me. To be smug is to be excessively prideful in oneself or one's achievements. It's an ego-driven way of being that isn't very pretty. Repentance, unfortunately, gets a bad rap in our dialogue today. Too often its tied to moralistic judgments on actions reflecting one's personal piety. For me, repentance was getting that my judgments about what God SHOULD do or how God SHOULD be based on how well I've behaved were just a bunch of baloney. I had thought I was a good enough person who deserved better! That attitude doesn't leave a lot of room for the good news of the kingdom. But the truth of the matter is this: It doesn't matter how good we think we are—and we've got tons of evidence to back this up (just think of all the Sunday services you've attended and how much money you've given to the church and how many outreach activities you've participated in)—despite all this wonderful evidence, God's grace and the experiencing of the Kingdom of God demands first and foremost our giving up our thoughts and minds, our ideologies and ideas, our politics and partisanship, to the Lordship of Christ. Yes, it's possible to be a Christian and still be miserable—that's what I was, and that's what a lot of y'all are—but I couldn't tell I was until I let it all sink in. I had relied on my goodness as evidence that God loved me and this was what keeping me from experiencing the Kingdom of God—I think we all do this—we insulate ourselves from the good news and trap ourselves in the failures of our minds. "The time is fulfilled," said Jesus, "and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The good news, my friend, is that we don't have to be right.

**We don't have to be on the winning side. And we don't have to revel in the failure of those we disagree with. We just have to respond to God's call to us—not unlike the disciples responded in Mark's lesson this morning. Mark's reading for today recounted Jesus calling the first 4 disciples to follow him: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. As a result, each one of them had their Jesus' story. I've got my Jesus story. You've got yours and if you're conscious of it, then you have your own Bible to write. You have a testimony of how God has saved you from your worst self. Over and over and over again we try God; we push God to what's got to be the limits of His grace; but God comes back and saves us again and again and again. Now get this: Our being present enough to this story to talk about it with others?—that's what grows a church. Churches grow when people testify to how the good news of the kingdom has changed their lives for the better—this is our task. Write your own Bible—and share yourself with others. This is what our Bible tells us. Get in touch with this journey, really, for yourself. God's blessings don't always come at us when we think we are ready, but they do come, and sure as shootin', they can pack a real wallop. To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen**